TWO FOR FIVE

Frank O'Rourke

HV 2345 O

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

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He found the round leather washers and felt like yelling with joy. "How many will you need?" he asked the girl with the nice perfume

Collier's, v.116, No.19, Nov. 10, 1945

# Two for Five

**BY FRANK O'ROURKE**

ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL

HV2345
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**Sight is a precious thing and Bob had lost his, but a boy and a girl gave him back a new vision of life and the world**

HE COULD feel the wind against his face and in the short hairs on his hands, cooled and slowed from its passage through the trees outside the window screen. He poised his fingers deliberately over the checkerboard, pondering his next move against the blacks; he had decided to throw the advantage to the reds this time.

He'd been playing checkers for two weeks, getting the feel of the round men and learning to gauge and picture the empty squares on the board, each space blocked off and identified by the raised lines that crisscrossed each other; and now, in his mind, he could see the board and the uneven pattern of the checkers under his spread fingers and he knew where to move and which side would win before the game was half played. But playing this game was really not important; the important thing was accustoming his fingers to the feel of space and raised surfaces, so that through the medium of his increasing sensibility he could learn to use this new and necessary sense on other things.

It was related to the feel of wind on his face and in his hand hairs. A month ago the wind was just wind; now he could feel to a high degree its temperature and speed, and sniff on its flowing tide the various smells of the land it had crossed before it entered the window. He had wondered in the beginning if a man did become hypersensitive to these things—smell and feeling and hearing—and now he knew this was true. His ears were keener now, something like highly tuned ack-ack sound equipment. It was just one of those curious change-overs a man went through when his eyes were no longer with him, and his ears, nose and fingers had to serve double duty in their place. That was how the doctors had described it to him in the hospital. They hadn't given him a lot of high-powered hoorah about going home just as good as he was before—nothing like that; but they had talked convincingly about the things he must learn and how he could go about learning them. He had worked hard this past month; and now, like the wind and the other small events, the sound and feel of people talking and feet walking and the bark of a dog and a car's horn were clear pictures in his mind.

He advanced the red checker to the front left, feeling the blacks nestling around it, and could see the game as it would develop within five subsequent moves. The blacks were licked and he grinned to himself because he had meant for the blacks to take a good whipping this time. He manipulated his fingers quickly and concisely, sliding the checkers across the board; and six moves later he executed the triple jump to the king row and the game was over. "Scratch one black," he said aloud, and swept the checkers into their box and put the board on the end table.

In the rear of the house, through two walls and a door, he could hear his mother rattling dishes and pans in the kitchen; and his kid brother, Ted, running up the front walk from school, shouting back at his departing friends, then calling a last "So-long" before he burst through the front door.

He knew his brother was playing their game now, creeping up the hall and sneaking into the room on his rubber-soled shoes, even holding his breath, and he let the boy get within five feet of him before speaking. "I heard you come in, Ted. You make more noise than a freight train." He laughed and his brother said, "Aw," and released his pent-up breath in one explosive burst.

"I thought I had you this time, Bob," his

*(Continued on page 52)*

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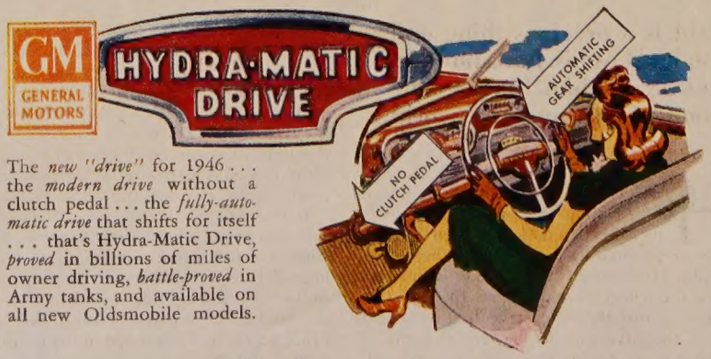


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## Two for Five

Continued from page 40

brother said ruefully. "We had a good day at school. I got two hits off that high school pitcher."

"No kidding," he said. "Singles?"

"Both good ones. One off that stinking little curve ball he thinks is so good. And I didn't put my foot in the bucket, either. I did like you said last night about batting practice. I laid a bat down so I'd trip if I stepped back, and it worked swell."

"Good," he said. "You're coming along fast."

"I want a drink," Ted said. "Excuse me, Bob."

He sat in the leather chair while his brother ran through the house to the kitchen, yelling at their mother, and he wondered if Ted's freckles were still the size of pennies, and his pants unpressed and his hair short and stuck straight up in those two stubborn cowlicks behind his ears. These things he could not know unless he felt them or asked; and he reflected glumly that they were the most important because they were ironically beyond his reach.

Ted came running back from the kitchen and plopped down beside the bookcase. He could hear him pulling up his socks and tying a shoe, and then the boy said, "Want to go for a walk, Bob? Let's go downtown and come home with Dad."

He knew his mother had prompted Ted to ask that question; and he knew how his mother was hoping, day after day, that he would go with one of them, down through the streets he had known so well, downtown to his friends and his father's lumberyard. That was the only thing he hadn't licked, and all other progress was as nothing because of this. This was the big thing, the important step, and he couldn't take it.

"Not today, Ted," he answered. "I want to read this new book that came this afternoon. I'm just beginning to savvy this Braille business. Did you see it?"

"No," Ted said, and jumped up and crossed the room to stand beside him and look at the book.

He lifted it from the table and opened the cover, running his fingers over the raised letters. "I can't read it very fast yet," he said, "but I'll get it down pat in another month."

"It sure is funny looking," his brother said. "Come on, let's take a walk."

"I will," he said. "Pretty soon, Ted. Wait until I get better on this stuff and know my way around."

"Okay," his brother said. "I got to meet the kids. We're having a game before supper."

"Get a couple of hits for me," he called.

HIS brother went down the hall and he heard the back door close and felt the air swirl around his face, and then the house was quiet again, with his mother moving softly in the kitchen and small sounds drifting in from outside. He heard his brother calling in the vacant lot across the alley, and the clear, high voices of the other boys, and then a bat cracked sharply against a baseball and yells rose in mingled joy and youthful disgust as the game got under way. And then he couldn't stand those light, happy sounds any longer, and he walked swiftly from the living room and upstairs to his room. He closed the door behind him and crossed to the window. The sounds were just as clear upstairs, and he slammed the window down hard and sat on the bed, rubbing his sightless eyes gently and biting his lip, hating himself for his cowardice.

This was the bad time when he thought, why can't I break through this barrier? I have licked everything else; why can't I go downtown and meet my old friends? Am I afraid they will laugh if I trip or stumble, or because they might say something careless and hurt me inside, where I must live with myself? Home one month and I have not been out in my own town. What difference if I cannot see the schoolhouse and the trees and Main Street and the park and the farmers driving in for lumber? I can hear dogs barking and hear the farmers talking in front of the barber shop and in the saloon. What if I can't see these things again? I can feel them because I remember them so well.

He got up and walked to his desk and sat, facing the book ends and his football letters on the wall and feeling his pen and pencils and his math books, all the equipment of his life before the war; and his mother's voice cut through his savage, dark mood like a beam of light: "Bob, dinner is ready and your father is home."

"Coming down, Mom," he called. "Soon as I wash."

Soon after supper that evening, he went upstairs to his room again, and washing and changing to pajamas, he stood in the window in the darkened room, hearing a passing car, a dog's lonely howl, and a boy and girl walking on the street, talking in low, happy voices. The loneliness lay heavy against his chest and he pressed his fingers against the window glass and frowned; and then told himself silently that he had to go downtown soon, not next week or next month, but tomorrow.

He heard voices below him and leaned toward the open window, pressing his ear against the screen; it was his brother and some friends, standing near the birdbath, talking in low, excited tones.

He heard one of the boys say, "Well, why don't he come out, huh? He ain't sick no more."

His brother said, "He is sick. He'll come out soon enough."

"Aw," the other boy said. "He's just scared, that's what he is; he can't see. He's scared to come out."

"He's not scared," Ted said, his voice thin and high. "You just wait—he'll show you."

He turned from the window and threw himself on the bed, pushing his face into the pillow. He was ashamed now, deeply ashamed of himself. He whispered against the pillow, "Tomorrow, tomorrow," and remembered it was Saturday.

He rolled over and stared with his sightless eyes at the invisible ceiling above him, feeling the tremor in his stomach and wondering if he had the guts.

HIS brother was eating a late breakfast when he went downstairs. He sat down and his mother said, "Hungry, Bob?" and set his plate down in front of him. He smelled the eggs and sausages and the fresh hot coffee Ted said, "Saturday is the best day in the week, you know that?" talking through half a mouthful of eggs and toast.

"Sure it is," he said. "Ted, you doing anything special this morning?"

His brother squirmed in his seat—he knew that because the chair legs gave off small, infinitesimal creaks—and answered, "Well, sort of, Bob. I was going swimming with the guys."

"I just wondered if you'd walk downtown with me," he said casually. "To the store and then you could go swimming. I'll come home with Dad."

His mother turned from the stove with a sudden swish of her skirt and he heard the frying pan clatter against the burner. He heard Ted gag over his mouthful of toast and egg, and then say, "Gosh, Bob, sure I'll go with you. You mean, like you showed me, with our hands touching?"

"That's it," Bob said. "We walk beside each other, our inside hands touching, so you can guide me."

His brother laughed, a bright, happy sound. "I'm a Seeing-Eye dog, Mom," he laughed.

"Sure," Bob laughed with Ted. "And if we see someone I know you tell me before they come close so I can say hello. Done with your breakfast?" He was getting the shakes now. He had to get started or he'd lose his nerve.

He drank his coffee in two gulps and got up, pushing his chair back and walking toward the door. "Let's go," he said. "Is it nice out this morning?"

"It's swell," Ted said, his voice normal again. "You want your hat, Bob?"

"I'll go bareheaded," he said firmly. He had promised himself to go that way. No walking like a coward with his hatbrim pulled low over his eyes. He knew the eyes were all right to look at. The doctors had explained that they weren't hurt outwardly and anyone seeing them would not know

# *Home . . . and all that it Means*

Folks who have been abroad seldom lack enthusiastic words to describe what they have seen in strange lands. Yet, there is one experience for the traveler that is far beyond his ability to make clear to others. It is that emotional moment when again he sees his native shore and a mixture of exhilaration and veneration soars from his heart.

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unless they came up close and really stared. He said again, with rising voice, "I'll go bareheaded."

Ted's hand came against his own, small and warm, and they walked down the hall and through the front door, out onto the porch, and he felt the warmth of the day and the fresh wind and noises from the street, loud and distinct.

Ted said, "Steps," and he said, "Okay, Butch," and they went down the five steps and across the lawn to the sidewalk. Ted said, "Gosh, this is swell," and he knew what Ted meant. The tremor went through Ted's arm and came up to his own. Then Ted yelled, with that casual victorious accent that all small boys have, "Hi, there, Bill. Hi, Jimmy," and he heard them answer and recognized the voices of the two boys under his window the night before; and he understood Ted's triumph and was glad.

They walked a block and he counted his steps and remembered the curb within three steps, and even recalled a crack in the sidewalk in front of the Jennings' house; and then they crossed the side street and the noises of the business block were louder now. He sorted them out automatically, identifying the trucks, cars, people, bicycles, horns, feet on paving and, high above, a plane floating westward.

He was frightened but he couldn't go back now, and his brother's hand was solid and firm against his own. They were in the business block now, passing the saloon—he could smell the malt and whisky and strong cigar smoke—and then they crossed the alley and far down toward the stockyards he heard the angry bellow of an enraged steer being forced up the loading chute into a stock car. And then he smelled talcum powder and more cigar smoke and face lotion, and a door banged open and a strong voice yelled, "Bob, you old son of a gun, where you been?" and he knew the voice before Ted could whisper.

"Matt," he said warmly, and held out his right hand. The barber's big, hairy, strong fingers closed over his and held them tight and shook them until his shoulder quivered.

"Gosh, Bob," Matt said, "you look swell. I thought you were never going to get well enough to come out and go back to work. We've all been waiting for you, boy—Bill Shock and Dale Beigler and even the well-digger."

He knew he was blushing but somehow he didn't care, now that he was here on his own street, his hand in his friend's. He said, "I'm all right now, Matt. I'll be with you all whenever you say the word."

"Tomorrow night," Matt boomed. "My house for some cribbage, see. The gals play this gin rummy so we just let 'em go and play a man's game. Bring a girl and prepare for a good time. Okay?"

He had no girl, no special one, and he had always felt good about this fact when he came home. Now he didn't know where to find one. He said, "I'll be there, Matt. See you later."

They moved on toward the lumberyard and he walked easier now, more relaxed and with some of his old, cocky spring in his legs. Then Ted said, "Here we are," and they turned off the wide sidewalk and followed the narrow one up the steps to the hardware-store porch; and Ted opened the screen door and he stepped inside.

Here is my life, he thought, my old job, my store and behind it the lumberyard, and I cannot see it—but I can, I can. All the old smells came to him with a clarity and sharpness that was tender and wonderful. He said, "I won't need your hand now, Ted," and pulled his own away and took another step, literally feeling the store in his ears and nose and on his hands. It was so strong, the memory. His father was coming from his private office and yelling, "Bob, you came down, you came down," and grabbing his arm and laughing.

He said, "I had to do it one of these days, Dad. This was as good as any."

His father laughed again, thickly, and said, "Good Lord, don't stand here. Come on and sit down and we'll talk. I'll bet you want to go over everything piece by piece, don't you?"

"All of it," he said. "Soon as you tell me what has changed."

"Changed?" his father said. "You know we don't change things here."

HE WALKED to the circle of chairs behind the stove and felt for the big one with the cracked arm and dropped into it. His father took his private chair across the circle from him, and his brother said, "Can I go swimming now, Bob?"

"Go on," he said, "but be back by noon, hear?"

"And don't get your pants dirty again," his father called, as the back door slammed behind the departing boy.

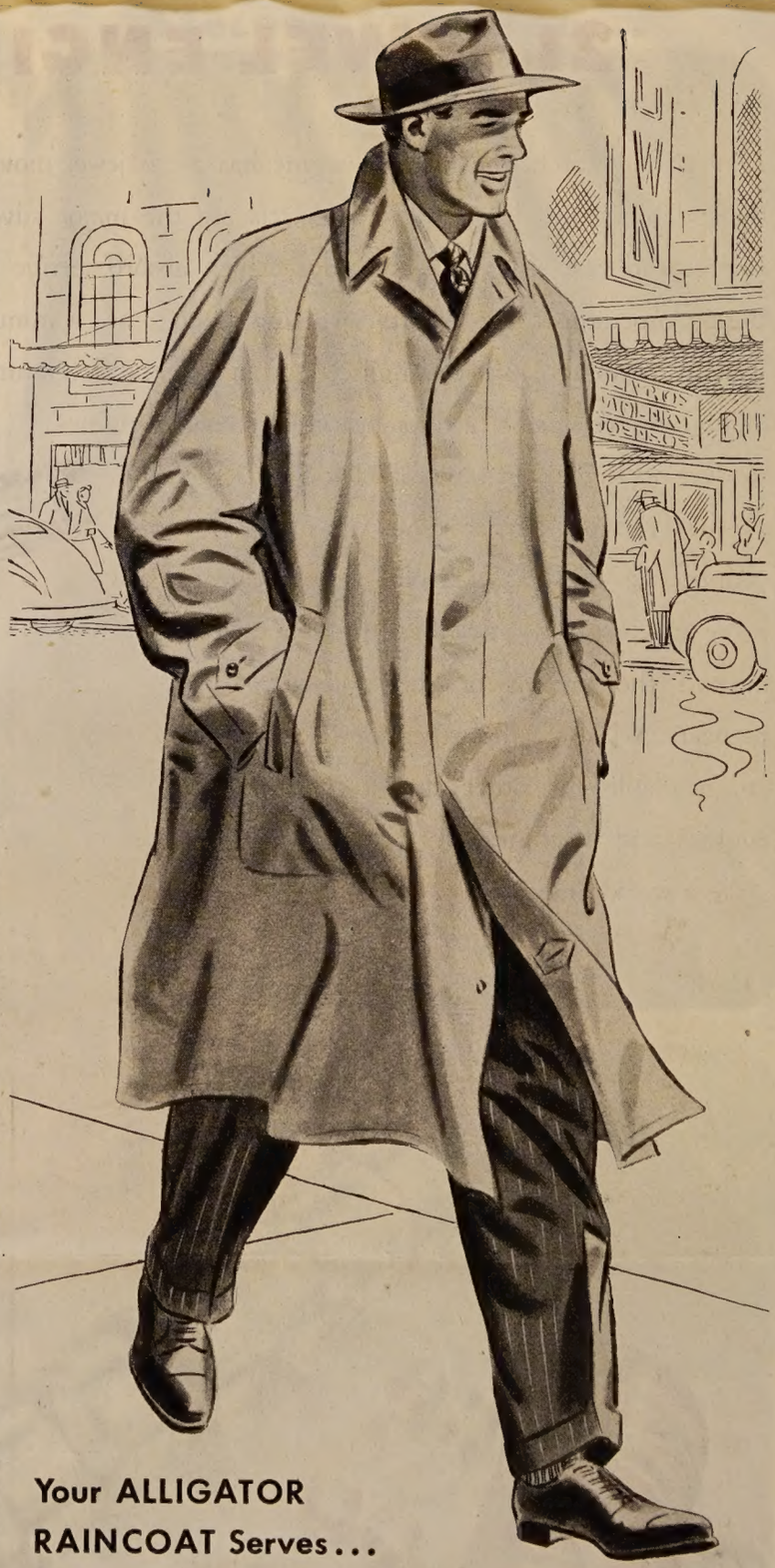
He and his father laughed together and he felt good, with that indescribable feeling of contentment moving into his mind and over his body. He could visualize the store around him, the tables and shelves and the big desk, and the safe and main cash desk and books and papers and carpenter tools in the glass case, and watches and paint and wagons and kid scooters. He remembered the calendars then and asked, "Still got the leg art on the wall, Dad?"

His father said, with that deep chuckle, "You know Elmer Olson. Ever know a window and glass man who didn't have the best pin-ups in the world? It's a redhead this year, Bob."

"I knew it," he said. "I'll sure be glad to see Elmer again."

"Listen, Bob," his father said. "I don't

COLLIER'S "I still want the rent" EMIDIO ANGELO

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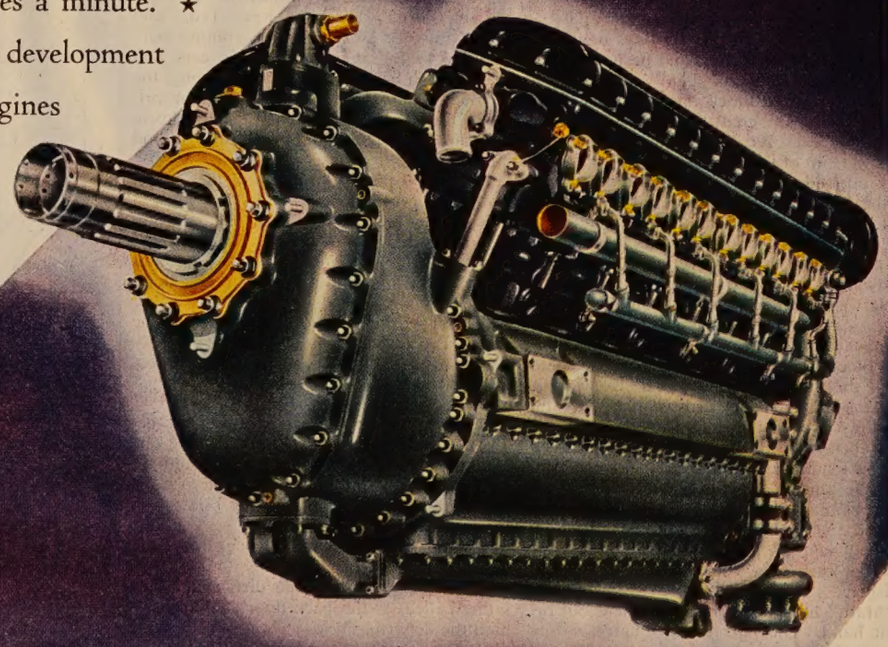

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here at the store."

"You mean right now?" he asked.

"Why not?" his father said simply.

"But—" he didn't know how to start.

"No excuses," his father said firmly. "Listen, you can get around here just as good as you did before. Don't kid me. Son, I need you now and you can help me more than you know. You'll be running this place some day and you might as well get back in harness. Too much fiddling around is bad. All you have to do at first is stay in here and wait on customers in the store—you know where everything is, or you will again in two weeks."

"I don't know, Dad," he said, and heard the truck drive past the window, going into the lumberyard. His father jumped up.

"That's Lyle Moss," his father said. "In for a big load of shingles. I'll have to help Elmer load them up. You watch the store till I get back."

His father was gone before he could protest. He heard the door slam and felt the air touch his face; and then he was alone in the store. He put out his right hand and touched the shelving on the north wall. He remembered that. He reached behind him, tipping back in the chair, and felt the bottom of the rack that held the fork handles and posthole diggers. He had made that rack himself. He remembered that. It hadn't gone away.

The front door opened and closed and he smelled a sweet, faint perfume and stood up, his arms stiff at his sides. A girl had entered and he did not recognize the perfume or her walk. He knew she was young, about his own age, because it was that kind of perfume. She came toward him, walking lightly, her heels tapping firmly on the floor, and he wondered how tall she was and who she was. Then she spoke, and her voice was a stranger's.

"Hello," she said. "I don't think I know you."

She was a stranger who must have moved to town after he went away. He said automatically, "May I help you?"

"Yes," she said. "I need two of those little leather washers you slip over a hose before you screw the nozzle on. You know what I mean, they keep the water from leaking out around your hands when you water the lawn." She laughed merrily, and he thought, she must have red hair. "I tried it this morning and almost drowned. Please say you have some."

IN THE brief moment before he answered, everything rushed to a point in his mind. This was the moment; either he did it now or he never would. She didn't know he was blind, he could tell that, and she thought he was a new clerk. She was standing about six feet from him in the shadowed coolness of the store and he could feel that she was relaxed and waiting naturally for his reply. He wanted to tell her he couldn't find those washers, he didn't know where they were; that she was blind herself not to see that his eyes were staring straight at nothing and always would.

"Please," she said. "Do you have them?"

He got his courage between his teeth then, and he remembered the store as it had been, and all the silly problems he had worked out in his spare time. He had known all the shelves and the floor space and how far it was from here to there for no good reason at all, except he had loved math and enjoyed working with it. He knew it was now or never; he had to give it a try.

"I'll see if we have them," he said. "Don't get many calls for washers."

He stepped forward, thinking with every step. His mind remembered steps from here to there. Let me see, it seemed to say, we were in the big chair, and we touched the fork-handle rack and it was six steps from the counter on the south side, and the distance between the west end of the counter and the east end of the big desk was three steps. He walked six steps and passed the girl, knowing that he almost brushed her shoulder for the perfume smell was strong and sweet at the fourth step. He swung to the right easily and moved between the counter and the desk, remembering the aisle between the counter and the wall shelves.

Now, his mind said, we are in the alleyway between the nail counter and the wall shelves, thought desperately—God, where was it? Then he remembered, and he walked five steps up the aisle, catching the left leg of his pants on the sharp edge of a nail box. He stopped, facing the wall shelves, and his fingers trembled. His mind said: If we can do this, God, if we can only do this, we can do anything. He reached up and his fingers brushed the handle and hung on; he pulled the drawer out and lifted it down onto the nail counter.

Now, his mind said, which part of the drawer, left or right side, front or back? The girl was standing across the counter now, watching him, and he smelled that nice perfume. She must be pretty, he thought, about my height and she must have red hair. That perfume goes with red hair. Then his fingers felt the small round leather washers with their centers cut out, and he felt like yelling with joy, with happiness.

"How many do you need?" he asked.

"Two will be enough," she said. "Unless they come in groups, you know, three for a dime or something." She laughed. "I'll take them all, if that's the case."

He remembered prices and decided that the war couldn't have shot the price of two washers up so high. He said, "They're two for a nickel."

"Don't wrap them," she said. "Save your paper. Here."

THEN he went cold all over, for she was handing him money, and he knew it was over if she gave him a bill. He hadn't perfected his sense of touch that finely. He couldn't tell a one from a five, and she might—he gritted his teeth and thrust out his hand. She dropped a coin into his palm and for a moment their fingers touched. Hers were cool and firm. He liked their feel.

He felt the coin and turned toward the big desk. Now, ten steps to the middle of the desk, his mind said, turn to the right, put the hand under the cash drawer, feel the pullers. He turned the coin over in his fingers as he walked; it was a quarter. When he reached the cash drawer, his middle fingers caught the three center hooks and pulled, and the drawer opened smoothly and the little bell rang clearly. He dropped the quarter into the third till from the left, and reached into the second from the left and found two dimes. Now, his mind said, close the drawer and turn right and walk ten steps back—no, she's walking toward me.

Then she was beside the desk, and he held out his hand, over the railing, and felt hers under it. He dropped the two dimes into her palm and said, "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," she said. "Are you new here?"

He smiled. He couldn't help it. "Sort of," he said. "Miss—"

"Oh, my name," she said. "Anne Moore. We moved here six months ago. I guess I must be blind or something because I simply don't remember seeing you."

"I'm Bob Jones," he said. "I just got back—discharged."

"That's why I didn't see you before," she said. "Well, we won't miss each other again. I'll be seeing you, Bob."

He said, "So long, Anne," and heard her turn and walk across the floor and open the front door, and then her steps died away on the porch and the sidewalk.

He stood at the desk, feeling the sweat in the palms of his hands and on the back of his neck; and he realized then what he had done and said to himself, "She didn't know it, she didn't know it," and then he remembered the party at Matt's and smiled.

His father stomped into the store, and the truck drove past the window heading for home with a full load. He could tell that; the motor was laboring hard.

"Any business?" his father asked.

He said it quietly, with none of the overflowing joy he felt in his heart: "Two washers to a girl, Dad. Are they still two for five?"

His father breathed heavily and came around the desk and stood beside him for a moment; and then his father's arm was around his shoulder, big and easy, and his father said softly, "Still two for five, Bob. I'll put it down."

THE END


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COLLIER'S "I'm afraid the boys are a little rusty!" DON TOBIN

## Give Us Tomorrow

**Continued from page 19**

"Peter, you're absolutely unmanageable," she said happily.

"Don't you want the ring?"

"Of course I do! I was just wondering what we'd do about bread and shoes for the children."

"Let the brats go barefoot," Peter said. "Don't worry. I've got a lot of things doped out. I'm going to have a talk with Kane next week. Camp on his trail and get some things out of my system."

"What things?"

"My future. I told him when I got back I wanted to talk things over. He brushed me off. But now I'm prepared to be definite. I'm going to get married and so I have to earn more money."

"Does it follow that you can always get it—by being married?"

"Sure. It should. In the Army married men automatically get a boost. That's what gets you girls husbands."

"I'm glad I'm that much of an asset. But why do you rush things with Mr. Kane?"

"I want my girl."

"Your girl will wait. Or marry you on what you've got."

"Would you?" he asked, taking her by the shoulders as if he still didn't credit that and then kissing her gratefully.

"You know I would."

"Well, you won't have to. I'll soon be doing better. The only thing I wish is that I didn't work for your father's company."

"It's a good company, isn't it?"

"That's the hell of it. And it's not so easy to move around right now. But I don't want to have what should be coming to me mixed up with any favors because I'm marrying you. I don't think that Mr. Kane would do that sort of thing, anyway. But I want to make it clear that I'm strictly on my own."

"Father feels that way, too."

"How do you know?"

"He said so. We were talking about everything last night."

"He hasn't got the notion that I'm trying to cash in on you in any way?"

"Of course not. Peter, he wants you to lunch with him at his club today. You will, won't you? It will give you a chance to get acquainted."

There was no need to say that it was her own suggestion, that she'd urged her father to give Peter lunch.

"You're coming, too, aren't you?"

"No. Father hates the ladies' dining room. And he probably wants you to meet some of his friends."

"All right, if that's what you want me to do."

"It's not what I want. I'd rather be with you. But Father is making a special effort. And, Peter, will you, too?"

"Will I what?"

"You and Father are bound to look at some things differently. Don't mind what he says."

"Such as what?"

"Well, you know. He doesn't think it's good sense for the men in his company to get into politics."

She was expurgating and putting it mildly. Jay Desmond had said to his daughter last night, "If you want that fellow to get anywhere, Ellen, you better get him to put his mind on his job, where it belongs, and to keep away from the state capital. And from that crook Lacey. The sort of activity he's mixing in isn't doing him any good at all with the men over him. And everybody knows what he's up to."

Peter was frowning.

"Yes, I know the theory," he said. "It's been to hire special men to manage the politics of the industry. Neither your father's company nor any other mining outfit of any size can keep out of politics. They're the big taxpayers. They've got a legitimate interest in the way the state spends their money. That's all fair enough. But they can't muzzle all the men who work for them. Where I got in wrong first was in going to a national convention without asking permission from my employers. But I got there. And I'm still not asking any permission when it comes to some things. If I think that a certain type of legislation is going to help a whole lot of fellows who come back from this war, I'm going to help push it. Why not? I do it on my own time."

He looked very stubborn. And remote, which Ellen couldn't bear. She kissed him to bring him back to her and said, "Of course, you're right. Just be a little tactful, that's all. I want so much to have you and Father like each other. Don't argue unless you have to."

ALL right, he wouldn't argue. He'd promised Ellen that he wouldn't, and he talked very little during that first half hour at Desmond's club. He listened. Peter had himself under a kind of amused observation. He didn't really belong here. Yet here he happened to be today, lunching with the president of his own company, sitting among the tycoons and eating their specially prepared shad roe.

His luck tickled him but it also made him feel something of a faker. The men at this table controlled a large share of the finance and industry of the whole region. Some of the men looked Peter over carefully, as if to see whether Jay Desmond had a liability in his prospective son-in-law. One or two spoke warmly of Ellen and congratulated him. Most of them only nodded briefly, as

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